

Statement by First Lady Nancy Freudenthal to
Senator Enzi and the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

Good afternoon Senator Enzi and members of this roundtable discussion. My name is Nancy Freudenthal and I am here today as Wyoming's First Lady and also as a representative of the Wyoming First Lady's Initiative to reduce childhood drinking. I am pleased to participate and provide information for the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, as it looks at state and local initiatives to combat meth use and as it generally prepares for the reauthorization of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA).

My comments will focus primarily on the First Lady's Initiative. I was pleased and honored to have the work of the Initiative recognized in the Governor's 2006 State of the State message to the legislature. I brought an excerpt of his message for the record. The Governor's message made some important points relevant to this roundtable discussion.

The first point made in his message is that the Wyoming First Lady's Initiative can set a template for attacking the related and equally frightening problem of methamphetamine use.

Under WFLI, we have brought together a statewide network of passionate advocates concerned with the public health problem of childhood drinking. These advocates are dealing with this issue from the community level – a “bottoms-up” approach, rather than using the traditional “top-down” model. The Initiative also emphasizes inclusion and partnership.

Specifically, we have partnered with state agencies, law enforcement, liquor and beer distributors and retailers, the military, judges, business owners, the faith community, the nonprofit sector, teachers, school administrators, local government officials, parents and students -- to change attitudes starting in each Wyoming community. Our team members have been incredible. With our team members, we have empowered local community efforts, provided resources and training, bought advertising, published statistics, collected news articles, distributed parent handbooks, posted “best practice” ordinances, advocated policy changes, held town hall meetings, mailed letters to nearly 16,000 Wyoming households, and engaged conversations all over the State – with one aim -- trying to be a supportive voice for change within Wyoming.

The experiences have been marvelous. FE Warren is leading the military with its 0-0-1-3 program, which started from WFLI training. People are engaged and talking about everything from the location of the beer tent at the county fair, to whether schools have good alcohol policies, to why parents, siblings and other adults supply alcohol to kids. We're trying to take prevention directly to all fronts: parents, schools and communities. Also, one of the most exciting developments is that our Wyoming students are taking a leadership role and showing real results in reducing risky behavior.

In short, we are hoping that each targeted prevention domain (youth, parent, schools and community) is reinforced by the other in order to bring about the best impact.

The lesson learned from WFLI is that this sort of community-based environmental strategy, which targets the most effective domains for change, can strengthen norms against childhood drinking.

Along this same line, the SAMHSA reauthorization needs to help refocus the emphasis of substance abuse prevention from mostly individual, behaviorally based programs to similar comprehensive community-wide strategies. It will never be enough to put the responsibility solely on the back of the individual – whether it is to refrain from drinking until 21, or to not use drugs, or to seek treatment for alcohol or drug use and abuse. The SAMHSA reauthorization must emphasize multiple strategies that create a comprehensive blend of individually and environmentally-focused efforts.

The second point made in the Governor's 2006 message to the Legislature is that early alcohol use by children is a predictor of more serious problems, including meth use. We know that children who drink put themselves at risk of perpetrating violence or becoming a victim of violence, suicide, unplanned and early sexual activity, and accidental injury and death. We've also heard the statistic that 40% of children who start drinking before the age of 15 will develop alcohol or drug abuse or dependence at some point in their lives.

As though this information is not worrisome enough, I recently received research linking early childhood drinking to later use of illicit stimulant drugs from the Director of the Division of Epidemiology and Prevention Research in the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. This research comes from a draft manuscript by Dr. John Hermos at the Boston University Youth Alcohol Prevention Center. Dr. Hermos' research clearly shows the younger kids first drink alcohol, the larger the percentage who then illegally used stimulants sometime in their lives.

Specifically, nearly ¼ (23%) of all respondents who said they drank before the age of 14 also reported illegally using stimulants, which would include meth. This percentage is even more dramatic when compared to those who waited to drink until they were 21. Only 2% of those respondents went on to then illegally use stimulants. This research tells us that early users of alcohol are 11 times more likely to later use stimulants compared to respondents who waited to drink until they reached the legal drinking age.

The lesson here seems clear. We ignore childhood drinking at our serious peril. To quote the Governor, "we can more effectively address meth problems by redoubling our attention to teenage and preteen alcohol use."

Thank you Senator Enzi for your commitment to this important issue. I encourage your committee to reauthorize SAMHSA with a strong emphasis on prevention and with provision that reflect the Sober Truth on Preventing (STOP) Underage Drinking Act. There is no question that prevention has been under utilized,

both as to funding and emphasis relative to its importance and effectiveness in reducing drug and alcohol use and their related human and societal costs.

The WFLI prevention work has been both rewarding and productive. I am convinced that its emphasis on partnership, cooperation and comprehensive, community-wide environmental strategies will change norms and save lives. I am also convinced that increased resources for community coalitions and states to enhance underage drinking prevention efforts will be a positive and important step forward in the fight against meth use, for all America – rural and urban.

Thank you.